

# **The Historical Origin of the Exodus**

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## **Abstract**

This research examines the possible historical realities contained in the biblical story of the Exodus. It presents evidence that the Exodus has a historical core reflecting the events and experiences of an Egyptian mining community in the Sinai, Timna, in the middle of the twelfth century BCE. The evidence is elicited from archeological evidence recovered from Timna, critical examination of the biblical sources and the research of scholars pertaining to the historicity of the Bible, ancient Near Eastern history, and contemporary anthropology. Examination of the theorized individual sources of the Exodus tradition is pursued via isolating the elements found in the earliest sources of the Exodus tradition and examining them independently without interpreting them in light of later traditions. The anthropology of contemporary peoples with lifestyles similar to those of antiquity is explored to facilitate the understanding of the cultural norms of people known only from ancient texts and archeological artifacts.

## **Keywords**

Exodus, Timna, Biblical History, Historicity of the Exodus, Pentateuch, Ancient Near Eastern History, History of Ancient Israel, Sinai, Moses, Christianity, Judaism, YHWH, Yahweh, Midian, Kenite, Phinehas, Levites, Golden Calf, Golden Bull, Ramses V, Ramses VI, 12th Century BCE, Copper Mining, Song of Deborah, Hathor, Canaan, Sacred Texts, Jael, Hebrew, Miriam, Tabernacle

## Introduction

The historicity of the Exodus is a subject of considerable debate among scholars of the Bible and the ancient Near East. Some contend that the Exodus story is wholly fictional, whereas others believe that it preserves fragments of genuine historical events. The research presented here argues that there is indeed a historical basis for the Exodus story. The historical event that inspired the Exodus was the migration of the community of the Egyptian mining settlement at Timna at the edge of the Sinai Peninsula to the Jordan Valley in the middle of the twelfth century BCE. This research confirms, by challenging a number of prominent hypotheses regarding the Exodus, that evidence from archeology, surviving texts, and anthropology fully supports the theory that a historical event at Timna is a probable link to the Exodus story.

It is important to understand the relationship between the classic biblical story of the Exodus and history. The story begins with the Hebrew people enslaved in the land of Egypt. After centuries, one of them, Moses, is adopted into the house of the Pharaoh and is later exiled to Sinai. After being commissioned by the god of the Hebrews, YHWH,<sup>1</sup> Moses returns to Egypt with command of his god's miraculous powers, which include famous episodes such as the Ten Plagues and the parting of the Red Sea. Then, Moses leads the Israelites from Egypt. After a generation in the wilderness, where YHWH delivers a series of

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<sup>1</sup> Also known as "Jehovah" or the LORD in different conventions of translating the Bible's terms. I have chosen YHWH due to doubts about the original vowels and a continuing tradition in some circles that pronouncing the name is taboo.

laws to the Hebrews,<sup>2</sup> the children of the escaped slaves conquer the lands of Canaan, creating the Israelite state.

Christianity and Judaism have traditionally assumed that the stories presented in their sacred texts of Exodus through Joshua are, in fact, actual events in history. Within the last few centuries, these traditions have been examined by people from the perspective of skeptical criticism, which has led to a debate that has yet to reach a clear consensus regarding the role of history in the Exodus. Part of the reason that a consensus does not exist regarding the historicity of the Exodus story is that the source materials (i.e., the texts of the Bible) contradict themselves and archeological and historical evidence. For these reasons, some scholars have concluded that the Exodus is likely only literary. However, most historians continue to believe that there is something historically accurate about the Exodus story – a genuine core.<sup>3</sup>

Among historians' most prominent arguments, one involves what the great biblical scholar Martin Noth called the most basic confession of the Exodus tradition: "Yahweh, who brought Israel out of Egypt."<sup>4</sup> Its prevalence and antiquity, in these historians' views, are best explained by its historicity. Another valid argument is that within the Exodus traditions, there are a number of genuinely Egyptian names, which supports the claim that Israel was

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<sup>2</sup> Within this research, the terms Hebrew, Israelite, and Israel will be used interchangeably to refer to the same group of people.

<sup>3</sup> Carol A. Redmount, "Bitter Lives." In *The Oxford History of the Biblical World* ed. Michael D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 87

<sup>4</sup> Martin Noth, *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions*, trans. Bernhard Anderson (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1981), 49

delivered from Egypt.<sup>5</sup> Another persuasive argument is made by Noth when he states that the most central human figure of the Exodus, Moses, certainly existed based on the genuineness of his burial tradition.<sup>6</sup> There has been significant debate regarding whether the Exodus has a historical core, but a clear majority supports the position that it does.

When searching for the history underlying the Exodus, the most common approach is the use of analogues -- historical events that resemble some significant component or theme related to the Exodus in the Bible. The Exodus, as described in the Bible, is generally regarded as impossible; thus, attempts to present a hypothesis for a historical Exodus rely on what has been called “compromise and selectivity.”<sup>7</sup> That is, some elements of the story are accepted as fiction, whereas others are argued to have historical sources based on findings from historical criticism.<sup>8</sup> Consideration of the evidence that is available indicates the abandonment in the middle of the twelfth century BCE of an Egyptian mine located in the Sinai Peninsula at a place called Timna as the analogue for the Exodus. This is suggested by a number of parallels between the details of ancient Timna and elements of the Exodus story:

- the core story components, which include a group of West Asians parting ways with Egypt;
- the presence of artifacts, such as those featured in the Exodus story, including holy mountains, pillars of smoke and fire, and smelting;
- the presence of important peoples from the Exodus, including the Midianites and Kenites, as well as a “Phinehas”;

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<sup>5</sup> Michael D. Coogan, *The Old Testament: A Historical and Literary Introduction to the Hebrew Scriptures* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 96-8

<sup>6</sup> Noth, 173

<sup>7</sup> Redmount, 72, 77

<sup>8</sup> For a fuller discussion of historical criticism, see Coogan, *The Old Testament*, chapter 2, “The formation of the Pentateuch.”

- destruction of a bovine idol; and
- natural phenomena that could be interpreted as supernatural.

Excavation and research have provided a number of facts regarding Timna's past. Timna was an Egyptian-controlled mine that was most likely occupied by a small contingent of Egyptian overseers and a number of local Semitic workmen beginning in the early thirteenth century.<sup>9</sup> Based on evidence from a continuous series of pharaohs' names inscribed at Timna at some point after the start of the reign of Rameses V (1147-1143 BCE), who is last attested in the inscriptions, and before the end of the reign of his successor, Rameses VI (1143-1136 BCE),<sup>10</sup> Timna was abandoned by the Egyptians following an earthquake.<sup>11</sup>

The lack of attestation for Rameses VI suggests that the site was abandoned either before or at the very beginning of his reign. A time prior to 1144 BCE is preferred because, presumably, the names of the current pharaoh would be added soon after word of a new pharaoh reached the site. In the opinion of Timna's excavator, the archeologist Beno Rothenberg, after a "prolonged interruption," it appears that the same local workers returned to Timna for a "short while." Greater precision is not possible, but a time of less than a generation for this period is the best interpretation. The returning locals took care to deface

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<sup>9</sup> Amihay Mazar, *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible 10,000-586 B.C.E.* (New Haven: Yale University Press. 1990), 286

<sup>10</sup> Regnal dates are all courtesy of Ian Shaw, *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press.2000), 481-9.

<sup>11</sup> Mazar, 300. The end of Egypt's occupation is based on inscriptions of the names of Egyptian pharaohs at the site. They consistently record the Pharaohs from Seti I to Rameses V. Presumably, the abandonment of the site by the Egyptians occurred either during the reign of Rameses V or before his successor, Rameses VI, had the opportunity to have his name inscribed at the site. See also Beno Rothenberg, *Timna: Valley of Biblical Copper Mines.* (London: Thames and Hudson. 1972), 110-1, 165-6.

Egyptian icons and to erase Egyptian inscriptions in what was an Egyptian temple dedicated to the goddess Hathor at the site before converting it into a tent shrine for ritual use.<sup>12</sup>

### **Correlations between ancient Timna and the story of the Exodus**

These facts at Timna correspond to the Exodus story in a number of ways. The core component of the Exodus story is the deliverance of a group of West Asians from Egypt. At Timna, there is evidence of a group of West Asians laboring under the direction of Egyptians who part ways under circumstances that suggest that their relationship was less than amicable. Comparisons have been made between some of the details in the Exodus accounts and the artifacts found at Timna.

Beno Rothenberg, whose excavations of Timna provided most of the information regarding the site's history, noted a few similarities. He suggested that the tent shrine that replaced the Egyptian temple in the last days of the site's twelfth-century occupation could be relevant to the Bible's account of the Israelites worshiping at a tent sanctuary while in the wilderness. Rothenberg also stated that a copper snake found in the tent shrine at Timna "...seems to furnish a factual background..." for the tradition of Moses fashioning a copper serpent during the Exodus.<sup>13</sup> The Bible makes references to pilgrimages to holy mountains in the wilderness south of the Land of Israel. Rothenberg reported that a number of sacred spaces were found at Timna in chapter four of his book on his findings, *Timna: Valley of Biblical Copper Miners*.

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<sup>12</sup>Beno Rothenberg, *Timna: Valley of Biblical Copper Mines* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1972), 111

<sup>13</sup>Rothenberg, 183-4

As mentioned earlier, Timna was home to a small temple to Hathor that was replaced with a tent shrine. This sacred spot was located at the foot of a large mountain at the center of the Timna mine colony.<sup>14</sup> It is impossible to determine whether any of the mountains at Timna are the mountains of Horeb or Sinai in the Bible, but the shrines and high places located at Timna are proof that the locals believed that the mountains had some sort of sacred power, and it is certain that religious rites were performed there.

In the biblical account of the Exodus, Israel is led by a pillar of cloud during the day and a pillar of fire by night. Timna, while it was operational as a copper foundry, would have been marked by pillars of smoke and fires visible for miles. The account in Exodus of the pillar describes it as a supernatural force that moves between the Israelites and the Egyptians, providing a flaming light for Israel and fog for Egypt. However, it is plausible that the recollection of what was once a familiar landmark in the Sinai faded and was interpreted by later storytellers to be a supernatural sign sent by YHWH. Elsewhere in the Bible, Egypt is described as an iron smelting furnace from which Israel is released (Deuteronomy 4.20, 1 Kings 8.51, and Jeremiah 11.4). This metaphor signifies the harshness of Israel's time in Egypt, but it is possible that it is rooted in a folk memory that the Exodus group was in bondage at a foundry like the one at Timna.

There is evidence at Timna that some of the more specific or unusual ethnicities and tribes of the Exodus story were present. Some of the people who lived there are believed to be from a tribe in the Bible called the Midianites. In the Exodus story, Moses flees Egypt to live among the Midianites and marries into one of their families (Exod. 2.11-22). Timna is located at the edge of what is believed to be their territory, as explained in the biblical sources.

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<sup>14</sup> Rothenberg, 125



Pottery found at Timna matches a type made at other sites that are believed to be in the heartland of Midian. For these reasons, archeologists consider Timna an example of a Midianite settlement.<sup>15</sup>

Rothenberg also connected Timna to the clan or tribe in the Bible called the Kenites. In some traditions, they are identified as the tribe of Moses' father-in-law (Judges. 4.11) and are believed to be a tribe or clan of Midian known for metal working. Rothenberg speculated that Timna would have been a likely place for the Kenites to have lived.<sup>16</sup> At Timna, among the bodies that have been excavated there, one was determined to be of likely sub-Saharan origin.<sup>17</sup> Among the individuals found in the story of the Exodus, one was named Phinehas, a name likely derived from an Egyptian word for a person of sub-Saharan descent.<sup>18</sup> It would not be unexpected to find a sub-Saharan at an Egyptian colony, so this finding only establishes that there were indeed sub-Saharans at Timna.

Another artifact found at Timna that has been discussed in relation to biblical traditions is a sculpture of the Egyptian goddess Hathor. The local people who inhabited Timna mutilated the face of the icon during the course of converting the Hathor temple into a tent shrine shortly before abandoning the site. It has been cited as evidence of iconoclastic beliefs among nomads of the Sinai.<sup>19</sup> This defaced artifact has been used as evidence to support the theory that Israelite iconoclasm originated among the people of the Sinai. More specifically, there is

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<sup>15</sup> Lawrence E Stager, "Forging an Identity," In *The Oxford History of the Biblical World*, ed. Michael D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 106, 110

<sup>16</sup> Rothenberg, 183

<sup>17</sup> Rothenberg, 103

<sup>18</sup> Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan, Ed. *The Oxford Companion to the Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 11

<sup>19</sup> Stager, 110

also a resemblance between the destruction of this image at the site of the mountainside shrine and the biblical tale of the Golden Calf (Exodus 32). Both involve the destruction of an icon that is representative of the practices of outsiders. The two icons share the use of the imagery of cattle. The icon that Aaron makes in the biblical Exodus is a young bull, whereas the goddess Hathor at Timna is a deity depicted as a cow or as a woman with a cow's ears, horns, or both.<sup>20</sup> The story, as told in Exodus, appears to be a comment on the kingdom of Israel's establishment of gold bull icons during the reign of Jeroboam, king of Israel, and a polemic against the Aaronid priesthood.<sup>21</sup> However, it is possible that an older story was appropriated and adapted because of its similarity to the contemporary situation.<sup>22</sup>

The episode that created the desecrated idol at Timna could have inspired a tradition like the Exodus's golden calf. The circumstances that led to this symbolic damnation of the deity could well have been the origin of the community that told the Exodus story as part of their foundational creed. It seems to represent a violent break from the past, and it might have been retold over generations with some details changed over time.

Finally, in some of the oldest sources of the Exodus story, YHWH is said to lead Israel from Egypt with signs and wonders.<sup>23</sup> Interestingly, it appears that Timna was struck by an earthquake immediately before the mine was lost to the Egyptians. Because the ancients often attributed rare and destructive events to divine displeasure, the earthquake not only might have contributed to the mine's abandonment but also have imparted religious meaning to it.

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<sup>20</sup> Erik Hornung, *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt*, trans. John Baines (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 277

<sup>21</sup> Coogan, *The Old Testament*, 132

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Martin Noth, *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions*, trans. Bernhard Anderson (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1981), 50

## **Divergences between Timna and Popular Understandings of the Exodus**

The parallels, in and of themselves, are merely suggestive. However, they provide a reason for further investigation. Before considering the events at Timna as an explanation of the Exodus story, coincidence must be excluded, and the reliability of the sources and other possible explanations must be examined. The first step is to look beyond the parallels and ask where the biblical Exodus story diverges from the evidence at Timna. There are some major facets of the Exodus story found in the Bible that are contradicted by the known history of Timna. However, on closer examination, these Exodus traditions can be reasonably explained as secondary to the Exodus tradition. That is, they were added to the tradition at a later point in history and thus could not be part of the original core of the Exodus tradition. For example, Timna was a community of a few hundred individuals at most. The biblical story claims that there were hundreds of thousands of individuals who left Egypt. However, the physical and historical evidence preclude the Exodus from involving more than a few hundred persons.<sup>24</sup> Most scholars maintain that the Exodus was the historical experience of a small “Moses” or “Exodus” group.<sup>25</sup> Timna fits this understanding of the Exodus as the action of a small company of west Asians.

However, major differences also exist between the circumstances at Timna and the most popular theories for the historical starting point of the Exodus and for the status of the Exodus group. The Bible describes the Israelites living as slaves for centuries in Lower Egypt, the land of the Nile Delta. Most scholars have followed this tradition and have maintained that the Exodus, or Moses’ group, consisted of slaves escaping from Lower Egypt. Timna, in

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<sup>24</sup> Coogan, 99-98

<sup>25</sup> Coogan, *The Old Testament*, 99; see also R. Norman Whybray, *Introduction to the Pentateuch* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 68.

contrast, is located in the Arabah Valley, between the Sinai and Arabian deserts. Although the Egyptians made use of slave labor, there is no evidence that anyone at Timna was a slave, although this cannot be excluded. Timna is not in Egypt, and its inhabitants might not have been slaves, but it is very possible that it was the site of the events of the Exodus. Scholars have argued that the themes of a sojourn in Egypt, Hebrews serving as high officials in Egypt and enslavement existed independently of the biblical Exodus story.<sup>26</sup> It is possible that the event that forms the core of the Exodus tradition involved none of these themes. As mentioned earlier, the most reduced account of the Exodus is the confession “Yahweh who brought Israel out of Egypt.”<sup>27</sup> This “primary confession” states that YHWH brought, or delivered, Israel from Egypt.<sup>28</sup> Yahweh’s actions regarding Israel and Egypt are vague in this confessional formula. For instance, one could speak of a group that left an employer, particularly a disliked and coercive one, as being delivered or brought from his employment and the oppressive treatment that it entailed. The people who left Timna could have described their experience as deliverance from Egypt although they were not actually in Egypt because Egypt colonized their homeland.

Regarding the slavery of the Israelites, although many biblical passages speak of the Hebrews as slaves in Egypt (Deuteronomy 5.15; 10.19; 15.15; 16.12; 23.8; 24.18, 22), earlier sources refer to them as aliens in Egypt without suggesting that they are slaves (Exodus 22.20; 23.9). One of these sources, the Covenant Code,<sup>29</sup> even addresses the treatment of

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<sup>26</sup> Noth, 46-7

<sup>27</sup> Noth, 49

<sup>28</sup> The presence of Israel in this confession must itself be regarded as a later addition because it is likely that Israel first came into being in the hills of Palestine and thus made no Exodus. Instead, it is believed that a small group actually undertook the journey and that they managed to have their history supersede Israel’s own.

<sup>29</sup> Exodus 20.22-23.33. See Coogan, 122-25 for its composition and antiquity.

slaves in Israel, but it never mentions the Hebrews being slaves in the past (Exodus 21.1-11: 23.12). In particular, compare Exodus 23.12 and Deuteronomy 5.12-15. The latter source in Deuteronomy refers to the Israelites' slavery to explain this law, whereas the Covenant code does not. This difference suggests that earlier tradition might not have specified that the Israelites were slaves before the Exodus. They are, however, always depicted as non-Egyptian. Further, the commands to be kind to foreigners because of the experience in Egypt could reflect the writers' own concerns about being foreigners among the Israelites.

Chronological examination further supports the plausibility of the evacuation of Timna as the historical event of the Exodus. Timna was abandoned in the middle of the twelfth century BCE, but the most popular theories for the Exodus place it before the twelfth century BCE.<sup>30</sup> The leading theory for the Exodus is based on the presumption that the Exodus "immediately preceded the Israelite settlement of Canaan."<sup>31</sup>

Outside of the Bible and for the first time in history, Israel is mentioned in the 1207 BCE "Merneptah Stele."<sup>32</sup> This monument establishes that Israel was a tribe in the Palestinian highlands no later than 1207 BCE. It indicates that the Exodus occurred before 1207 BCE, if the Exodus preceded the settlement. However, there is no reason to assume that the event of the Exodus preceded the settlement of Israel. The Exodus as presented in the Pentateuch features the occupation of Israel following the Exodus, but as discussed, the group that participated in the Exodus could not have been very large and could not have represented the

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<sup>30</sup>Redmount, 77

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 79

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 71

whole of biblical Israel.<sup>33</sup> Noth argued the Exodus group somehow managed to have the story of their immigration to Canaan incorporated into the saga of the whole of the Israelite people. The majority of the tribes calling themselves Israelites would have had stories far different from the Exodus group's story based on their own local situations. The claiming of the land narrative that was used in the Pentateuchal tradition seems to be that of the central highland tribes.<sup>34</sup> This region, which was the home of the tribes of Ephraim, Benjamin, and Manasseh, seems to be the core of the Iron I settlements, and this region first experienced a growth in settlements at the beginning of Iron I.<sup>35</sup> However, archeological evidence does not support the conclusion that the people who settled the central highlands during Iron I were from beyond the land of Canaan. Their material culture is indistinguishable from that of surrounding Canaanite people and suggests that most of the people of the first tribes of Israel did not come from Egypt; rather, they were indigenous.<sup>36</sup> This means that the story of the settlement told by the Pentateuch is not the story of the Exodus group. The people who carried the Exodus tradition might have arrived after the settlement of the central highlands and had their story of deliverance from Egypt absorbed into the tribal histories of the early Israelites.

Israel, meaning "El Contends,"<sup>37</sup> is named after the Canaanite god El, yet the Exodus in its earliest sources was an act of the god YHWH, who is unattested in extra-biblical Canaanite

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<sup>33</sup> See the previous page.

<sup>34</sup> See Noth, 52-54 for a fuller discussion.

<sup>35</sup> Jo Ann Hackett, In *The Oxford History of the Biblical World*, ed. Michael D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 161

<sup>36</sup> Stager, 102

<sup>37</sup> Wayne T. Pitard, In *The Oxford History of the Biblical World*, ed. Michael D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 54

sources. Israel might have been established in Canaan before the events of the Exodus. There is no evidence to suggest a tradition that El led Israel from Egypt. Many scholars have suggested that the people of Israel originally revered the god El as their chief deity. The name they chose seems to reflect this situation. In some of the sources of the Pentateuch, the god of Israel only reveals his name to be YHWH during the story of the Exodus. The biblical scholar Wayne T. Pitard concluded that this convention serves to explain why the Israelites worshiped El as the chief god in the past but now worship YHWH in the same role.<sup>38</sup> These sources suggest that YHWH was only introduced to Israel at the time of the Exodus. The Exodus group is thus a good candidate for introducing YHWH, indicating that there was an Israel before the Exodus and that Israel worshiped El. The Israelites mentioned in Merneptah's stele might have had no tradition of the god YHWH or of an Exodus from Egypt.

In fact, the evidence supports the theory that the Exodus occurred in the twelfth or early eleventh century BCE. The oldest sources in the Bible are dated to the twelfth to eleventh centuries BCE,<sup>39</sup> and the more time that elapses between a source and the events that it purports to relate, the less likely it is to be an accurate testimony. The Bible preserves no accurate awareness of the history of Canaan before the twelfth century; before the twelfth century, Canaan was occupied by Egyptian forces, yet the Bible never mentions this situation. Many of the important people mentioned in the Bible, such as the Philistines, Moabites, and Ammonites, only came into existence at the transition between Late Bronze and Iron I. The Philistines, who arrived at the beginning of the twelfth century, are in fact presented as

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<sup>38</sup> Pitard, 54

<sup>39</sup> Hackett, 158

having lived in Israel centuries earlier, during the time of Abraham (Genesis 21). Although there are extensive records concerning the names of peoples within Canaan before the twelfth century, none of them mentions Israel until Merneptah's stele in 1207.<sup>40</sup> The Bible does not attest to Merneptah's campaign against Israel in 1207.<sup>41</sup> It is only after the thirteenth century that contemporary events and events in Canaan's known history are found the Bible.<sup>42</sup> During this period, Egypt's grip on Canaan began to slip; Canaan seems to have been free of Egyptian forces soon after the reign of Rameses III ended in 1153 BCE.<sup>43</sup>

The very presence of Timna's Egyptian colony throughout the period in which the Exodus is believed to have occurred is a major problem for theories that posit the Exodus occurring before the twelfth century BCE.<sup>44</sup> Before then, any persons escaping to the Sinai to be free of Egypt would be fleeing to what was effectively Egyptian territory. Thus, if the Exodus has a historical core, it is not likely to have occurred before the twelfth century BCE because the Bible otherwise has no connection to history before this time.

An end point for the Exodus tradition can also be established. If the Exodus event led to the introduction of YHWH to Israel, then it must have preceded the composition of the *Song of Deborah*, found in chapter five of the Bible's Book of Judges. Linguistic evidence indicates a date of approximately 1100 BCE, plus or minus 50 years, and the poem's subject

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<sup>40</sup> Coogan, *The Old Testament*, 98

<sup>41</sup> Redmount, 72

<sup>42</sup> Coogan, *The Old Testament*, 203

<sup>43</sup> Shaw, 299

<sup>44</sup> Rothenberg, 184



appears to be a contemporary event from a Yahwist poet.<sup>45</sup> These facts make the poem the earliest evidence that Yahwists were present in Israel.

The *Song of Deborah* places the tribe of Dan at a different location than their later territory at the city of Laish/Dan, indicating that this poem was almost certainly composed before the Danites destroyed Laish and built their own city, Dan, on its ruins.<sup>46</sup> Archeologists date this event to Iron Age IB, which covers the time from approximately 1150 BCE to 1000 BCE, so the Exodus could have occurred no later than 1000 BCE, and it is more likely that the *Song of Deborah* was composed closer to 1100.<sup>47</sup> In summary, Timna presents an example at the correct time of a sizable population of Egyptians and Semitic tribes associated with the Exodus leaving an Egyptian-controlled site under circumstances that show evidence of hostility toward Egypt.

### **Biblical scholarship and the case for an Exodus from Timna**

As explained earlier, it is likely that the events that formed the historical core of the Exodus also introduced the god YHWH to the Israelite people. A popular hypothesis of how YHWH was introduced to the Israelites also supports the hypothesis that the Timna mining colony was instrumental in the Exodus event. This hypothesis is called the Midianite-Kenite hypothesis. Based on evidence from the Bible and contemporary Egyptian sources, it argues that YHWH was a god native to inhabitants of the Sinai Peninsula called the Midianites. Either they or a branch of their tribe called the Kenites introduced this god to Israel, for

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<sup>45</sup> Frank Moore Cross and David Noel Freedman, *Studies in Ancient Yahwistic Poetry* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1975), 3; Hackett, 149. However, not all scholars would agree that such a precise date can be assigned to these texts.

<sup>46</sup> Stager, 125

<sup>47</sup> Mazar, 301, 335

whom YHWH was a novelty.<sup>48</sup> With the Midianite presence at Timna, it can be said that the Midianite-Kenite Hypothesis suggests that YHWH had been worshiped there as well. More importantly, the Kenites would likely have been present at Timna. The Kenites were most likely a tribe of itinerant coppersmiths; their name means “metal worker.”<sup>49</sup> Timna, as a large center of copper mining and smelting that was largely performed by local people must have been a large center of copper-working Midianites, likely the Kenites.

The Midianite-Kenite hypothesis is supported by investigation of the roles played by smiths in traditional societies. Through biblical source examination, it is suggested that such roles also applied to the Kenites. Paula M. McNutt’s article “In the Shadow of Cain” documents a number of practices and traditions among traditional smith clans and links these traditions to what is written in biblical sources about Cain, who is believed to be the eponymous ancestor of the Kenites.<sup>50</sup> Some of the practices of the modern traditional smiths, which McNutt referenced in her study, show that a clan of smiths could be instrumental in introducing new religious practices to a population. For example, smiths also served as prophets, circumcisers, mediums, and magicians. Along with the professions most closely aligned with the practice of a religion, smithing clans might engage in professions and have privileges that would help to introduce them to a broad group of people. Among the professions documented are bards, musicians, tinkers, scouts, and merchants.<sup>51</sup>

Smiths are sometimes regarded as being neutral in conflicts. This custom prevents smith clans from participating in tribal wars, and it carries the privilege of being exempt from

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<sup>48</sup> Stager, 105-11

<sup>49</sup> Coogan, *The Old Testament*, 32

<sup>50</sup> Paula M. McNutt, "In the Shadow of Cain," *Semeia* 87 (1999):45-64

<sup>51</sup> McNutt, 45-74

others making war on them. Thus, the Kenites were well placed to serve as intermediaries and points of distribution of culture, particularly of a religious nature, between otherwise hostile tribal groups if they shared these common attributes of traditional smith clans. Timna was a large source of copper throughout Canaan, so copper working clans there would likely have had contact with Timna when obtaining supplies and would have exchanged news, ideas, and members.<sup>52</sup> Timna would have likely been a central hub of Kenite culture. The stories of the events and people at Timna would have radiated to all Kenite communities and possibly to the Kenites in Israel. The abandonment of Timna might have influenced the creation of the Exodus story and perhaps been its core inspiration.

However, it is plausible, and indeed probable, that the people who abandoned Timna in fact migrated to the territory dominated by the early Israelite confederation in the central Palestinian hills and Jordan valley. They were the people who introduced the YHWH cult to Israel. According to a hypothesis introduced by Joseph Blenkinsopp in the article “The Midianite Kenite Hypothesis Revisited and the Origins of Judah,” the tribes that formed the Judean kingdom were themselves part of a Midianite confederacy; thus, the Yahwist cult was part of Judah’s ancient traditions.<sup>53</sup> However, the Exodus’ core of deliverance from Egypt seems to have been adapted to the theme of occupying the Promised Land among the central Palestinian tribes in northern Israel.<sup>54</sup> The implication is that the Exodus core was known in Israel before the southern Judean tribes became dominant. This theory makes sense in light of the evidence that the Exodus event led to the introduction of the Yahwist cult to northern

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<sup>52</sup> Mazar, 359

<sup>53</sup> Joseph Blenkinsopp, "The Midianite-Kenite Hypothesis Revisited and the Origins of Judah." *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 33.2 (2008): 131-53.

<sup>54</sup> Noth, 53

Israel. If true, it does not seem that it was the Kenites of Judah and their allied tribes that experienced the Exodus event. Blenkinsopp wrote in his article, “The hypothesis about Midianite-Kenite origins of the Yahweh cult has obvious implications for ethnic origins, specifically the origins of Judah, and raises the further question of how this cult came to be adopted by the early Israelite settlers in the central Palestinian highlands.”<sup>55</sup> Although Blenkinsopp’s Midianite confederacy hypothesis leaves the introduction of YHWH to northern Israel a mystery, the association of individuals from the Exodus tradition with institutions, locations and folklore in northern Israel suggests that it was there that the Exodus group journeyed, plausibly with the tribe of Reuben, whose preserved traditions seem also to indicate a Midianite origin. The period when the biblical sources locate the Midianites within the land of Israel coincides with the period when Timna was abandoned, and these sources present the Kenites within the land of Israel during this period. These facts make it plausible that migrants from Timna journeyed to northern Israel at this time, and they introduced YHWH to Israel.

The settlement patterns of the Levites, the custodians of the religious institutions in Israel as described in the biblical sources, suggest a tradition that the priestly Levite clans of northern Israel were founded by participants in the Exodus. The Levite clans were said to have been allotted settlements throughout the tribes of Israel. The three principle clans of Levites are named Kohath, Merari, and Gershon (Joshua 21:4-7). The three clans are supposedly named for the sons of the mythical ancestor of all the priestly families, Levi (Numbers 3:17). Merari, however, could be a variation of the name Miriam, one of the

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<sup>55</sup> Blenkinsopp, 143

Egyptian-named<sup>56</sup> figures of the Exodus, said to be Moses and Aaron's sister.<sup>57</sup> Gershon is a variant of Gershom,<sup>58</sup> a son of Moses (Exodus 18:3-4); the name means "foreigner,"<sup>59</sup> suggesting that the clan's name derived from popular belief that they were foreigners, that is, not from Israel, as would be the case for the people who made up the Exodus group. The clans of Miriam and Gershon were said to have had territories on the outer fringe of northern Israel: East Manasseh, Issachar, Asher, Naphtali, Zebulun, Reuben, and Gad (Joshua 20 and 21). Merari has among its sub-clans a line named Mushi (Numbers 3:20). Mushi has been explained as meaning "descended from Moses."<sup>60</sup> The belief that these traditions are reliable records of the names of the northern Israelite priestly clans is suggested by biblical sources that do not attribute descent from Moses or Miriam to these clans. As mentioned, they are instead said to be named after the sons of Levi.

The reason for this appears to be the biases of the later biblical writers and editors, who were from Judah and who traced the priesthood from Aaron. In the traditions that they created, only descendants of Aaron, not Moses, were permitted to perform sacrifices to YHWH. It seems that these editors censored any reference to Levitical clans being descended from Moses or any other figure whose importance to the central founding myth, the Exodus, might have challenged the primacy of the Aaronid priesthood. Hence, the names most likely preserve an earlier tradition of the Levites of northern Israel being descended from members

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56 Rita J. Burns, *Has the Lord Indeed Spoken Only Through Moses? A Study of the Biblical Portrait of Miriam*. SBL Dissertation Series 84 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987),9

57 Exodus 15.20

58 Dr. William Smith, "Entry for 'Gershom'". "Smith's Bible Dictionary". . 1901. BibleStudyTools.com, 2014 <http://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionaries/smiths-bible-dictionary/gershom.html>

59 Attridge, 87

60 Richard Elliott Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible?* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), 129.

of the Exodus group. In the case of Gershon, the etymology of the name itself suggests a genuine tradition of a priestly line founded by outsiders from beyond Israel.

Aaron himself has a name that scholars argue is of Egyptian origin. However, he appears to be an entirely secondary addition to nearly all of the traditions of the Exodus in which he appears. The possible exception is the battle in Exodus chapter 17.<sup>61</sup> The territories that Aaron's Levitical clan is allotted in biblical sources are all either within the territories of the Kingdom of Judah or in areas where Levitical clans were deposed by Jeroboam. This fact suggests that the Aaronid priesthood was purely a Judean phenomenon. Aaron's association with the former Levitical enclaves in northern Israel is likely the result of later writers, who were free to claim these sacred sites for their own Aaronid priesthood because no other Levites had possession of them. Aaron himself, if historical, could have been a figure from the Exodus group who splintered off from the Moses group to settle in the south or who was a minor figure of the North's Exodus tradition, which was appropriated by the southerners when they adopted the North's traditions to legitimize their own native Kenite-derived priesthood.

The tradition of Moses' burial also suggests a northern origin for the Exodus tradition. Moses is the most prominent person in the Exodus story. His Egyptian name is one of the chief reasons for believing that the Exodus has a genuine historical core, and the details of his burial on the outer edge of the territory of Reuben and Gad have been explained as proof of his historical existence. The territory of Reuben was considered part of the northern tribes of

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<sup>61</sup> Noth, 181

Israel, and Reuben was included on the earliest known list of tribes.<sup>62</sup> According to Noth, Reuben, along with Gad, was one of the tribes whose story of entry into the land was documented in the early sources for J and E before it was replaced with the separate Joshua tradition.<sup>63</sup> It is possible that it was in the region of Reuben that some of the earliest Exodus stories emerged.

Phinehas, another Egyptian-named character from the Exodus tradition, is a figure from folk tales set in the central highlands, further supporting a northern origin for the Exodus tradition. In Joshua 22, Phinehas leads a force of Israelites centered at the holy site of Shiloh in confrontation with the tribes across the Jordan, especially Reuben, over the construction of an altar feared to rival the one that serviced the tabernacle. In Judges 20, Phinehas is presented officiating at the tabernacle in the northern Israelite town of Bethel during a war against the tribe of Benjamin.

Blenkinsopp's hypothesis that Judah was part of a Midianite confederation allows for the inclusion of Simon and Levi, but he did not argue for the inclusion of Reuben. However, it is likely that Reuben was a member as well. According to the evidence found in Deborah 5, Reuben was clearly part of Israel before Judah, Simon, and Levi. However, Reuben is listed among the sons of Leah, the mother of the other Judahite tribes in Genesis, which suggests that the writers of this story believed that Reuben was more closely related to the Judahite tribes than to the northern Israelite tribes, either by ethnicity or past confederation. Reuben's birth order as the oldest of Rachel's children could reflect that it was traditionally understood that Reuben was part of the Israelite confederation before the other Judahite tribes. Further,

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<sup>62</sup> Hacket, 149

<sup>63</sup> Noth, 72-3

Reuben's genealogy according to 1 Chronicles 5 includes a son named Hanoch, which is also the name of one of the sons of Midian listed in Genesis chapter 25. One of the clans descended from Judah in 1 Chronicles 2 is named Hezron, which is also the name of a son of Reuben. This fact suggests that some of the clans believed to be part of Reuben were also believed to have had branches in, or once had relationships with, Judahite/Midianite tribes. Reuben's plausible Midianite relationship, in conjunction with Reuben's centrality to the Exodus tradition and the hypothesis that the Yahwist cult was of Midianite origin, supports the hypothesis that the Exodus group was part of Reuben and that their tradition was adopted by Israel when Reuben joined the Israelite confederation.

The period when the biblical sources locate the Midianites within the land of Israel coincides with the period when Timna was abandoned. These sources also present Kenites within the land of Israel during this period. This information supports the position that Timna's inhabitants migrated to Israel after abandoning Timna in the middle of the eleventh century. Evidence of a Kenite-Midianite presence is also found in ancient poems and traditions preserved in the Bible. The *Song of Deborah* features a heroine named Jael, who, according to a later tradition, was a Kenite.<sup>64</sup> If this tradition is accurate, then it indicates that Kenites were present in Israel during this period. As discussed earlier, Reuben was also present, and this tribe seems to have been closely involved with the Midianites. Another early source appears in the book of Judges, Chapter 1. The Kenites, descended from Moses' father-in-law, are said to have shifted their settlement at Jericho to follow Judah into the Negev. This story seems to reflect later traditions in which Judah was part of the Exodus group that

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<sup>64</sup> Cross, 23. Cross argued that the verse explaining that Jael is a Kenite is a later addition to the original poem.



crossed over the Jordan, which is unlikely, but it could still accurately reflect a tradition of Kenite habitation at the site of Jericho. Another later tradition recorded in Judges 4 repeats the tradition that Kenites participated in the battle at Kishon and specifies that some Kenites separated from the larger community in the Negev to live in northern Canaan.

Evidence of a more specific time when the Midianites and Kenites infiltrated Canaan is found in the account of Gideon and his son Abimelech.<sup>65</sup> Gideon's story involves the defeat of a Midianite force that lived beyond the Jordan and that had been raiding Israel for a period of years. Clues to the date of this event are provided in the subsequent story of one of Gideon's sons, named Abimelech, who is said to have destroyed a temple in the city of Shechem. Archeological evidence establishes that this occurred in approximately 1100 BCE.<sup>66</sup> This evidence suggests that Gideon's battle with the Midianites occurred approximately a generation earlier, demonstrating a Midianite presence in Israel in the middle of the twelfth century BCE, apparently for the first time. Finally, a source found in Genesis 36 purports to list the kings of Edom who ruled before David in Judah. David's reign is reliably dated to have begun in approximately 1005 BCE.<sup>67</sup> The list names four kings who ruled before a king named Hadad, who was credited with defeating the Midianites in neighboring Moab. The lengths of their reigns are not provided, but if it was between five and 40 years per reign,<sup>68</sup> then there is an interval of 15–120 years between Hadad's death and David. Thus, the author of this list surmised that Midianites were driven from Moab

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<sup>65</sup> Judges 8-9

<sup>66</sup> Mazar, 333-4

<sup>67</sup> Coogan, *The Old Testament*, 241

<sup>68</sup> Counting time by the reigns of kings is, of course, imprecise. At most, a range of plausible time spans can be determined. Averages can be found by taking a list of kings for a given kingdom and dividing the total length of the reigns by the number of individual kings, for example, using the data presented.

somewhere between 15 and 160 years earlier, for a date of between 1165 and 1020 BCE, with a preferable date of approximately 1100 BCE. This date fits the evidence for the Midianite incursion found in the Gideon story, and it is approximately a generation after the abandonment of Timna, suggesting that the Midianites were present on the east bank of the Jordan river during the twelfth and eleventh centuries BCE.

If Midianites and Kenites were migrating to Israel during the period when Timna was abandoned, why would the people at Timna not participate? A group of copper workers and seers would be ill suited to survive off the land in the remote deserts of northern Arabia alone. These occupations require a population of farmers with surplus food. It would be a good decision for a large community of metal workers, such as that at Timna, to move to more populated lands so they could profit from their skills. Canaan was the closest such populated land. The local workers at Timna would have had cultural ties to the people there, including a related language. Clearly, judging from the manner in which they attacked the Egyptian shrine, the people at Timna would not look to Egypt for a new home. Further, the thirteenth and twelfth centuries were periods of documented turmoil in Canaan. A large number of cities were destroyed during this period. Egypt withdrew its garrison forces, and a number of new settlements appeared in the central Palestinian hills, where there were olive groves and shepherds.<sup>69</sup> Because urban areas tend to be centers of crafts and services, the destruction of so many of these areas during the Late Bronze Age could indicate that the new settlements in the central Palestinian highlands were underserved by the sorts of professions

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<sup>69</sup> For a fuller discussion of the time and the state of Canaan in the Late Bronze Age, see Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed: Archaeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of its Sacred Text*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002), chapters four and five.

in which the people at Timna specialized. For the people who abandoned Timna in the middle of the twelfth century BCE, travelling north to Canaan was likely the best choice.

## **Conclusion**

Parallels between the Bible's Exodus story and the archeological evidence at Timna prompted this investigation into the plausibility of the idea that the events surrounding Timna's abandonment provided the historical core of the Exodus. A Timna Exodus is supported by the widely received Midianite-Kenite hypothesis for the origin of the Yahwist cult and Paula McNutt's anthropological study of traditional smiths' social roles, particularly cultic services. In addition, this research demonstrates that the evidence from Timna is compatible with the Exodus' fundamental element, the parting of a group of West Asians from Egypt. Other elements from the Exodus tradition include the brazen serpent idol, the presence of a number of individuals with Egyptian names, the Midianite and Kenite tribes, sacred mountains, pillars of smoke and fire, references to smelting, the desecration of a bovine idol and an earthquake -- an event not mentioned in the Exodus but one that could easily have been seen as a powerful divine intrusion into the world and interpretable as an expression of displeasure from a god. All of these elements are compatible with the evidence from Timna.

Although it cannot be conclusively proved, the theory proposed by this research presents a plausible scenario for a historical Exodus. The elusive kernel of truth that inspired the enduring tradition of the Exodus is thus reasonably located in the historical record preserved at Timna. The research presented here could be the basis for further investigation of the early development of Jewish civilization. From this evidence, a plausible, although imprecise, account can be suggested for the core of the Exodus.

Between 1143 and 1136 BCE an earthquake struck Egypt's Timna mining colony. Perhaps interpreting the earthquake as a divine omen or necessitated by the effects of the earthquake, the inhabitants of Timna abandoned the site. The Egyptians who lived there might have accompanied the local inhabitants willingly or unwillingly, if they did not return to Egypt or were not killed by the locals. Although the Egyptian names in the Exodus stories indicate the presence of Egyptians in the Exodus group, it is not impossible that locals at Timna adopted Egyptian names. The tradition that Moses married into a Midianite or Kenite clan might reflect a situation in which Egyptians at Timna married local women.

The abandonment of Timna corresponded to, or perhaps precipitated, a Midianite mass migration toward Canaan, which was joined by the Timna migrants. At some point before 1150 BCE, perhaps following a brief reoccupation of Timna, the migrants, which included members of the Kenite clan of metallurgists and a number of individuals with Egyptian names, settled in the area of the Jordan valley. This was most likely in conjunction with the tribe named Reuben, which seems to have made a transition around the same time from a Midianite confederation to the Israelite confederation. These metallurgists also performed cultic roles like other traditional smiths, and they introduced the Midianite god YHWH to the Israelites, either by voluntary individual adoption or perhaps by way of an early agreement between Israel and Reuben.

The Timna families established a number of priestly orders in Israel, as evidenced by the names of the known priestly orders of Israel. By some means, they became dominant among Israel's cultic professionals, and their god became identified with Israel's chief god, El. As this process unfolded, the memories of the time at Timna were incorporated into the national origin myth of the Israelites, replacing those of the individual tribes and clans and becoming preserved in their folklore and liturgy. Later descendants of the early Kenites incorporated them into the Yahwist sacred text, the nucleus of the Bible. The reason that the tales of such a

small number of migrants in Israel became the core of the nation's origin story can perhaps be found in the *Song of Deborah* in Judges 5.10-11 (NRSV):

“Tell of it, you who ride on white donkeys,  
you who sit on rich carpets  
and you who walk by the way.  
To the sound of musicians at the watering places,  
there they repeat the triumphs of the Lord,  
the triumphs of his peasantry in Israel.”

It was they who sang at the watering places, where people gathered from all around the countryside, who chose what deeds were immortalized, more so than the heads of households and the warlords, who only had local audiences. The Kenites, as traditional smiths, might also have been the bards of the early Israelite confederacy, and they would have been in a position to shape the narrative of all of the Israelite peoples. It is not the victor that writes the history; it is the historian.

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